

w 5 takeaways from the final 2020 presidential debate
Aaron Blake



After a mostly unwatchable *first debate*, then a *canceled second one*, we got a heated but relatively substantive *final matchup* between Joe Biden and President Trump on Thursday in Nashville.

Below, some takeaways.

1. Trump offers no course correction on coronavirus

For weeks now, perhaps the biggest question has been whether Trump, whose presidency is on the line as the clock ticks down toward Nov. 3, might actually try something different from what has earned him his current deficit in national polls.

The revised debate rules and Trump's approach led to fewer interruptions than the previous debate. But from the jump, the content of Trump's case was unmistakably familiar — especially on the biggest issue of the day, the novel coronavirus.

With his very first words, Trump recycled the misleading claim that 2.2 million people were “expected to die” from the coronavirus. In fact, one model said that many could die, but only with precisely zero mitigation — which is an extremely low bar to brag about clearing.

Almost as quickly, Trump reverted to his long-running efforts to *downplay the severity of the virus*, despite his long-running unpopularity on the issue.

“There was a spike in Florida, and it's now gone,” Trump said. “There was a very big spike in Texas; it's now gone. There was a very big spike in Arizona; it's now gone. And there were some spikes and surges and other places; they will soon be gone.

We have a vaccine that's coming. It's ready. It's going to be announced within weeks and it's going to be delivered."

Even as Trump was saying this, though, the number of new daily cases nationwide was [hitting its highest point](#) since the middle of the summer, with both hospitalizations and deaths also increasing. Trump has for weeks said we're turning the corner, and this was in the same vein.

Trump was also pressed on saying the vaccine was coming shortly and actually backed off it a bit.

"No, it's not a guarantee, but it will be by the end of the year," Trump said. "But I think it has a good chance."

Trump also repeated his frequent and misleading claims that we only have so many cases because we have so much testing. He also falsely quoted infectious-disease expert Anthony S. Fauci as having said, "This is no problem; this is going to go away soon," which bears no resemblance to anything Fauci ever said, despite Trump claiming they were Fauci's "exact words." Trump even at one point said of the virus, "We're learning to live with it."

It wasn't quite "it will go away," as Trump spent much of the early outbreak saying. But the subtext was the same: Trump fudging and making up the details and downplaying the threat, even as the numbers and health officials say something very different — that we're headed for a particularly arduous time and that the present trends are hardly so encouraging.

2. Biden sharpens his coronavirus closing argument

Biden responded to Trump's "learning to live with it" by pointedly saying: "People are learning to die with it" — a comment that reflected some of his harshest comments yet about Trump's coronavirus response.

Biden was clearly trying to focus his closing argument against Trump on it.

"Two-hundred twenty thousand Americans dead," Biden began. "If you hear nothing else I say tonight, hear this: Anyone who is responsible, for not taking control — in fact, saying I take no responsibility initially — anyone that is responsible for that many deaths should not remain as president of the United States of America."

Biden also referenced Trump's [comments to The Washington Post's Bob Woodward](#), in which Trump offered a much more dire account than he was publicly giving at that point.

"But he didn't want to tell us," Biden said. "He didn't want to tell us because he didn't want us to panic. He didn't want us — Americans don't panic. He panicked."

3. Trump tries to make an issue of Hunter Biden, in fits and starts.

If there was one thing Trump wanted to talk about at the start of the night, it was [Hunter Biden](#). Non-conservative media have trodden uneasily around the allegations about the younger Biden's business dealings, given concerns about its veracity and the possibility that the information might have been filtered through foreign sources, which Trump lawyer Rudolph W. Giuliani and Trump have

repeatedly engaged in their quest for some kind of dirt on the Biden's. (Trump was impeached over precisely this.)

Trump even began the night with a bit of stagecraft that made his aim clear: He invited Hunter Biden's former business colleague, Tony Bobulinski, who recently [confirmed the veracity of some of the communications](#), to the debate (similar to Trump inviting Bill Clinton's accusers to a 2016 debate). Trump was trying to make the story, which has been largely avoided, unavoidable.

And he was able to insert the topic to some extent.

"But now with what came out today, it's even worse — all of the emails, the horrible emails of the kind of money you were raking in, you and your family," Trump said. "I think you owe an explanation to the American people. Why is it — somebody just had a news conference a little while ago who was essentially supposed to work with you and your family — but what he said was damning."

Precisely what was so "damning," though, wasn't clear. Trump repeatedly alluded to the idea that Biden was getting money from foreign sources, without really connecting the dots on it. There was no dwelling on what the emails even showed.

Biden did respond in some substance, saying, "I have not taken a penny from any foreign source ever in my life." But then he pivoted to making Trump the issue, noting that we just found out about [a previously undisclosed bank account that Trump has in China](#) and that Trump has paid more in taxes there than in the United States.

Trump let himself be lured into accounting for Biden's attack, and the attack on Hunter Biden largely fell by the wayside. Trump tried to interject it again by raising Hunter Biden's discharge from the military and his work for the Ukrainian energy firm Burisma, and he later tried to bring up the "laptop from hell," which Biden responded to by suggesting the whole thing was related to Russian disinformation.

But in each case, the debate quickly moved on, and virtually anyone watching who wasn't already familiar with the story probably wouldn't know what to make of it all.

4. Biden's dicey energy comments

To the extent Biden might have created issues for himself and his party, he did so at the end of the debate.

Biden was pressed on his position on fracking. During a Democratic presidential primary debate, he fought off attacks on his position by saying, "No new fracking."

His campaign then [sought to clarify](#) that Biden meant no new fracking permits in federal areas, while allowing existing fracking operations to continue. But Trump and Republicans have cast this as Biden being in favor of banning fracking altogether.

Joe Biden's fracking defense, explained

Biden said Thursday, "I do rule out banning fracking, because the answer [is] we need other industries to transition to get to, ultimately, complete zero emissions by 2025. What I will do with fracking over time is make sure that we can capture the emissions from the fracking, capture the emissions from gas."

It was certainly a more nuanced answer than he gave in the primaries.

Trump then pressed Biden on whether he would “close down the oil industry,” to which Biden responded, “I would transition from the oil industry, yes ... because the oil industry pollutes significantly.” Biden added that this should be part of the process of transitioning to renewable energy.

“Oh, that’s a big statement,” Trump responded, clearly believing he had lured Biden into a trap. “That’s maybe the biggest statement in terms of business; that’s a big mistake, because basically what he’s saying is he is going to destroy the oil industry.

Will you remember that, Texas? Will you remember that, Pennsylvania? Oklahoma? Ohio?”

A Democrat running in Oklahoma quickly distanced herself from what Biden said.

The comments weren’t wholly new from Biden, but he seemed to inch closer to Trump’s premise on closing down the oil industry. Expect Trump and congressional Republicans to press this case in the days to come.

Biden again sought to clarify his comments after the debate, saying, “We’re not going to get rid of fossil fuels for a long time.”

5. A better debate

The format changes, which included muting one candidate as the other spent two minutes initially responding to a question, were contentious.

Trump and his allies also built up the debate by repeatedly attacking [moderator Kristen Welker](#) for allegedly being biased against him.

But it all worked. There were far fewer interruptions — perhaps because Trump recognized it didn’t really work for him last time, but also because of the changes — and there was a far more substantive exchange on the issues.

Welker moved things along frequently, allowing many different topics to get discussed.

It was far from the dumpster fire that the last debate was. Even Trump seemed to appreciate it.

“So far,” Trump told Welker about halfway through the debate, “I respect very much the way you’re handling this.”

Aaron Blake